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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 372nd MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Tuesday, 27 January 1998, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. BUSTELO GARCIA DEL REAL
(Vice-Chairperson)

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In the absence of the Chairperson, Ms. Bustelo García Del Real, Vice-Chairperson, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

Initial report of the Czech Republic (continued)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Hejna, Ms. Kucharová, Ms. Machová, Ms. Jerabkova, Ms. Gjuricova, Mr. Visek, Ms. Kastankova, Mr. Fuchs and Ms. Polakova (Czech Republic) took places at the Committee table.

2. Ms. HEJNA (Czech Republic), responding to the Committee's concerns about her Government's apparent over-emphasis on the role of women as mothers, recalled that the Czech Republic was just emerging from over 40 years of totalitarianism, which had completely destroyed the structure and basic functions of the family. Under that regime, women had been forced to work and children had been placed in collective child-care establishments from the age of two weeks; that had affected the physical and mental health of both mothers and children. With the restoration of democracy, Czech women now valued the maternal and family functions which had been denied them under the previous regime. Strengthening the family as the basic social unit had helped to mitigate the social and economic effects of the transition to democracy. Strengthening the family unit had also led to a decline in the divorce rate, despite the enormous difficulties created by the transition process.

3. The Government's current policy stressed freedom of choice. Women could choose to pursue a career or to stay at home to care for their children and families with the State's financial support. In that regard, the right to such financial support also applied to men. The husbands of women with well-paid jobs in sectors such as banking often decided to stay at home and take care of young children. Indeed, structural changes in the employment area had led to a redistribution of the functions and responsibilities of men and women, with the result that men now assumed a greater share of family and household responsibilities. Women's new role was obviously linked to the advent of democracy, the transformation of society and economic change. The Government must now give top priority to harmonizing work, social life and family life. In that regard, the Government had been unable to implement the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women because it must wait until the process of social change was complete.

4. For a long time, the previous regime had exercised total control over all of civil society, including non-governmental organizations, and had suppressed dissent. Following the fall of that regime, non-governmental organizations had proliferated. However, people had since found other avenues of self-expression, in political as well as professional life. Human rights education had been suppressed under the previous regime; one of the most important goals of the democratic Government was the promotion of human rights and human rights education. The Government was still trying to explain basic political concepts,

and individual women's organizations were still seeking their place in the political spectrum. In that regard, it would take some time before a common direction was found.

5. Social change would gradually be reflected in a growing number of women in decision-making positions and in politics. Generally speaking, Czech women did not support a quota system, although their representation in government was rising steadily. Following the 1996 parliamentary elections, women had accounted for 15 per cent of members of the lower chamber of Parliament and 18 per cent of members of the Senate or upper chamber. The proportion of women in municipal governments was 18 per cent.

6. Women accounted for 62.7 per cent of all judges; they accounted for 67.1 per cent of judges in the regional courts and 35 per cent of Supreme Court judges. About 40 per cent of the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and 25 per cent of the staff of the Ministry of the Interior were women. Two of the 17 ministers in the new Government were women: the Ministers of Justice and Health. The Deputy Chairman of the lower chamber of Parliament was also a woman and a number of women were deputy ministers and heads of department.

7. Major reforms had also been carried out with respect to the role of the media, especially in the crucial areas of the status of women and human rights. In the past, the media had been a propaganda tool of the totalitarian regime. Now, ways were being sought to raise public awareness of women's concerns through the media. A major effort had also been made to overhaul the country's cultural institutions to bring them into line with the Convention.

8. Responding to the Committee's concern that the Czech Republic had not established any national body for women nor any national machinery to follow up the outcome of the Beijing Conference, she noted that the new Government would pay special attention to women's issues, including the obligations arising from the Convention. In that regard, the Government planned to establish a commission on the status of women within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Other ministries, non-governmental organizations and research centres would have an input into the work of that commission, which would be financed from the State budget. One of the tasks of the research centre created under the Ministry of Social Affairs was to gather comprehensive data on women.

9. Ms. KUCHAROVÁ (Czech Republic), noting that her country's socio-economic transformation was still ongoing, said that the standard of living and lifestyles of individual social groups were evolving in different directions. Some women had benefited from the country's transformation, while others had suffered considerably from the growing unemployment, price liberalization, the rising cost of living and the dismantling of the paternalistic system. Women were protected through the wide social safety net, government support for non-governmental organizations and civil associations and an active unemployment policy. Women's traditionally high rate of employment had been maintained; in 1997, that rate had been 24 per cent, although there were differences according to age. Generally speaking, women's economic activities had declined in the 1990s for several reasons, including the possibility of taking early retirement under the new pension system and the granting of benefits to people who stayed at home to care for children under the age of four.

10. Women's main reasons for working were their often high qualifications, their adaptability, the need to supplement their income in order to improve their standard of living, and the perception of employment as a means of gaining independence. In the 1990s, the highest increase in female employment had been in the banking and insurance sectors, while women's employment in agriculture and processing industries had declined sharply. Female employment in the trade, education, health and social services sectors had also been high. A relatively high proportion of women were employed in fields requiring advanced qualifications, such as research. However, there were far more women than men in unskilled jobs. The high proportion of women in unskilled jobs resulted in high unemployment rates for women. On the other hand, since a greater proportion of women than men had secondary education, that gave them greater flexibility on the labour market, where they held a larger share of middle-level positions. The fact that 4 per cent of women, as compared with 9 per cent of men, held very senior positions in the legislature and at the highest levels of government partially reflected the educational structure of the economically active population.

11. One of the noteworthy changes brought about by privatization was the large number of women in the tertiary sector; the number of female entrepreneurs was high compared with other countries. In 1997, 5.2 per cent of self-employed persons had been women, as compared with 10.3 per cent of men. Women were not as interested as men in establishing businesses, however. According to one sociological survey, 7 per cent of women and 11 per cent of men in the labour force intended to set up their own business. The Ministry of Industry and Trade planned to establish support programmes for small- and medium-sized enterprises run by women. In-service training courses were also available for both men and women. According to the same survey, employed women in many fields were generally as satisfied with their jobs as men were.

12. Women were often prepared to take less demanding jobs so that they could fulfil their family responsibilities; such women did not then feel that they were suffering discrimination in the workplace. Some 27 per cent of women reported discrimination in the workplace, over half of them for personal reasons, 30 per cent for reasons connected with gender, and a small percentage for reasons such as age, political orientation, education and health status, with ethnic origin in last place. In general, women felt that they had fewer opportunities than men to advance to senior positions, improve their qualifications and earn comparable salaries. According to sociological surveys, about 60 per cent of working women, as compared with 30 per cent of working men, were in subordinate positions. The differences were less marked in respect of the chances of finding work after losing a job or graduating from university. According to some surveys, women were less interested in mobility than men; about 3.6 per cent of women in the labour force were looking for new jobs and the reasons given were usually to earn a better salary or enjoy better working conditions.

13. As in many other countries, women's unemployment had been higher than men's for a long time. After several years of stagnation, the unemployment rate had risen to about 2.5 per cent for men and about 4 per cent for women in 1992-1996. In 1997, the rate had increased for both sexes; currently, the unemployment rate was about 4 per cent for men and about 6.1 per cent for women.

14. There was a clear link between unemployment and educational level, with higher unemployment at lower educational levels and also among single mothers and other disadvantaged persons. Unemployment was also higher in rural areas. According to surveys, more women became unemployed because of family responsibilities, and more men became unemployed through choice. Unemployed women were usually provided for, because their partners were employed and they could claim social benefits. Unemployment in the Czech Republic was not usually associated with poverty and social exclusion, because the unemployment rate was relatively low and the proportion of long-term unemployed persons was small. About 30 per cent of unemployed women had been unemployed for over a year and the figures were the same for men. Unemployment services were well developed and included job placement, guidance and counselling services, and refresher training. Special attention was paid to young people and the disabled.

15. The Employment Act in force since 1991 required employment offices to pay special attention to young people. There were a number of programmes for young people who had not completed primary or secondary school, and also retraining and job placement programmes. Those measures targeted boys and girls alike and were geared to specific needs. There was also special provision for mothers with children and mothers re-entering the workforce after maternity leave. Some 60 to 65 per cent of unemployed women participated in refresher training courses organized by employment offices. The Government ensured the dissemination of information and coordination of the activities of all interested bodies.

16. One of the problems associated with the transition period was poverty. Poverty did not affect women any differently from society as a whole, since it affected families rather than individuals. Sociological surveys did not consider gender as an indicator of poverty. In the Czech Republic, there were low-income groups and persons threatened with poverty, rather than poor people as such. Nevertheless, certain categories of the population and certain marginal groups were at greater risk than others; they included unskilled women in backward regions, elderly women living alone, single mothers, Roma women and girls, drug addicts, homeless women and prostitutes. Measures were being taken, within the social support system, to assist women in such situations. The assistance provided by non-governmental organizations was also very important. Poverty was also associated with unemployment and the rising cost of living. Since statistics on poverty were calculated for families, poverty among women could be determined only in the case of single women. No precise information was available on income distribution within families. The proportion of households with incomes below the poverty line had been under 1.1 per cent in 1995. The risk of poverty for single women, however, was very high, especially for women pensioners and women with a low level of qualifications combined with other handicaps. The most common reason for poverty was temporary exclusion from the labour market.

17. Ms. MACHOVÁ (Czech Republic) said that two amendments had been made to the Family Law in 1989. First, the equality of church and civil marriages had been established; second, section 46 had been abolished on the basis of a finding by the Constitutional Court that it was in violation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, which established that parents had the right to ensure the care and upbringing of their children and that minor children could not be

separated from their parents, except by a decision of the court in accordance with the law.

18. Work was currently under way on a new family code which would comply with progressive precepts of family law and introduce a modern, well-balanced concept of family relations. A number of studies and analyses of the family codes of many Western countries had been carried out. In 1997, the Czech Republic had hosted a seminar on family law in Prague. The head of the team working on the new family code had for some time been a member of the expert committee on family law of the Council of Europe, and the Council's recommendation on family mediation would be incorporated into the new code. Preparations for the new code were being widely publicized and were attracting a great deal of attention from non-governmental organizations, women's organizations and professional associations, some of which had made proposals on how to address certain issues in the code. The Czech Parliament had introduced several bills relating to aspects of the new code. Work on the new code had now reached the stage of consideration of specific proposals on, in particular, divorce, the only method of divorce in the past having been through adversary proceedings; child custody after divorce; child support and alimony; and relations between the spouses.

19. Ms. JERABKOVA (Czech Republic) said that the Czech Republic regarded the Convention as the culmination of the development of international law on the emancipation and equality of women. The legislation of the Czech Republic on the protection of human rights and freedoms and women's rights was described in the report.

20. Under article 10 of the Constitution, ratified and promulgated international instruments on human rights and fundamental freedoms were immediately binding and took precedence over domestic legislation. The Constitutional Court had competence to determine whether laws and regulations were inconsistent with the Convention; the Court had not received any complaints of such inconsistency.

21. The Czech Republic welcomed the preparation of an optional protocol, which would enable individuals and groups of people who had exhausted domestic remedies to apply to the Committee. The optional protocol would encourage States to pay much more attention to the implementation of the Convention.

22. In response to the question as to how the Convention was being disseminated in the Czech Republic, one example was a booklet on the legal situation of women in the Czech Republic which had been published in 1996 by the University of Prague and which covered all relevant aspects of the Convention.

23. Ms. MACHOVÁ (Czech Republic), replying to the question as to why there was no specific law in the Czech Republic prohibiting discrimination against women, said that Czech legislation was based on the principle of the equal and general protection of the rights of men and women. The subject of those rights was the citizen, regardless of gender. As to judicial protection, in situations where a person wished to assert his or her rights in court, the Code of Civil Procedure stipulated that the parties to court proceedings had equal status and had the right to be heard and to speak in court in their own language, and the court had to ensure them equal conditions for asserting their rights. Under section 19 of

the Code, anyone who had the capacity to have rights and duties had the capacity to participate in civil proceedings. Under section 7 of the Civil Code, the capacity of a natural person to have rights and duties arose at birth. Those provisions clearly demonstrated the equality of parties in civil proceedings.

24. Under section 72 of the law on the Constitutional Court, any individual or legal entity who claimed that a decision in a procedure or an intervention by a public authority had violated his or her basic rights or constitutional freedoms could apply to the Court. So far, no one had filed a petition with the Constitutional Court alleging that a court had not ensured his or her equal status in its proceedings.

25. Ms. JERABKOVA (Czech Republic) said that the decrease in the number of non-governmental organizations was a natural sequel to the very sharp increase at the time of independence. The Government had begun cooperating with non-governmental organizations in December 1997 in preparing its report for the Committee on the Rights of the Child. At that time, representatives of more than 50 relevant non-governmental organizations had met with experts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Similar cooperation would be sought with non-governmental organizations dealing with women's issues. In presenting future reports, the Czech delegation would give an indication as to which sections incorporated the views of non-governmental organizations.

26. Ms. GJURICOVA (Czech Republic), replying to questions on crime prevention, said that, in the Czech Republic, crime was viewed as a social and pathological phenomenon. The National Commission on Crime Prevention, a coordinating body at the ministerial level, comprised representatives of the Ministries of Justice, Labour and Social Affairs, Education, Health, Defence, Regional Development and Finance. An interministerial commission on drug abuse, coordinated by the Minister of the Interior, participated in crime prevention activities and monitored their cost-effectiveness; their cost in the past two years had exceeded 110 million Czech koruny. The National Commission's priority was to establish a comprehensive approach to crime control at the local level, in other words, in residential areas.

27. Crime prevention programmes were based on the principle that the activities of the Government and its agencies, the police, non-governmental organizations, charities, entrepreneurs and citizens should be coordinated. Those programmes now included police counselling on self-protection against crime, and cooperation with local authorities. Recently, the Government, in cooperation with the legislature, had assumed responsibility for the methodology of such programmes; it also initiated and coordinated activities at the local level. Crime prevention programmes focused on the reintegration of individuals in society, the containment of crime-generating situations, the dissemination of information on self-protection against crime, and assistance to crime victims. They were primarily funded from the State budget; other sources of funding included ministerial and municipal funds and grants, foreign foundations and, more recently, the private sector.

28. Counselling centres and helplines operated by sociologists, psychologists and other experts had been established for mothers in difficult situations and were maintained by non-governmental organizations, charities and the Government;

their coverage was limited, however. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sponsored counselling centres, and non-governmental organizations and charities assisted female victims of violence. The Ministry of the Interior and the Department of Crime Prevention were also working with non-governmental organizations at the national level and promoting cooperation at the local level.

29. The Criminal Code did not prescribe specific penalties for male perpetrators of violence against women; however, its provisions on forcible rape, sexual abuse, incest, injury, failure to provide assistance, restriction of personal liberty and damage to the property of third persons were applicable in many such cases. Improvements in Czech programmes of assistance for female victims of domestic violence would be modelled on those of the United States of America.

30. Ms. MACHOVÁ (Czech Republic) said that the statistics which the Committee had requested on the sexual abuse of women would be forwarded from the Czech Republic at a later date. Sexual abuse was dealt with in the Criminal Code under crimes against liberty and human dignity, including forcible rape and trafficking in women.

31. Mr. VISEK (Czech Republic), replying to questions on violence committed against girls within the family (article 5 of the Convention), said that the Czech social protection system, created under special laws and implemented through child welfare departments or district offices, was responsible for the protection of girls. Under the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms which formed part of Czech constitutional law, and in accordance with many international treaties, the State was required to protect girls against violence and to ensure their healthy development, including their moral development. The outdated Law on Social Protection was to be replaced by a new law which would define "endangered children", identify groups of children eligible for social protection and establish government bodies to that end. The social protection of children was viewed as a duty of the general public as well. Under the new law, the State would intervene only when parents had proved to be unfit. Welfare workers also played a major role in child protection, and handled cases in which children under the age of 15 committed acts that might otherwise be characterized as crimes. In 1997, the number of welfare workers had been increased to 1,700; each worker was required to handle approximately 400 cases annually. Facilities were also available for children from dysfunctional families, children with learning disabilities and, since 1991, pregnant minors. With State funding, non-governmental organizations sponsored hotlines and contacted crisis centres for youth in difficult situations.

32. Ms. GJURICOVA (Czech Republic), replying to questions on article 6, said that prostitution had increased dramatically since the attainment of independence in 1990. That increase was attributable to the opening of the country's borders, which had been sealed since 1948, and to the demand for Czech prostitutes among foreigners, particularly visitors from Germany and other German-speaking countries, but also to the decline in the economic and social situation of certain groups, particularly non-skilled workers, whose standard of living was near the poverty line. Prostitution was most prevalent in border areas and in large cities, particularly Prague. In an unprecedented

development, the services of prostitutes were being offered in secret houses and hotels. As indicated in the report, the spread of prostitution had resulted in a high incidence of venereal disease, although, fortunately, there had been no significant increase in HIV/AIDS. In addition to being a social problem, prostitution was a threat to law and order, and to the moral development of young people, and was linked to organized crime and the activities of aggressive international gangs from Bulgaria, Ukraine and the former Yugoslavia.

33. Action to control the situation was being taken in cooperation with 12 non-governmental organizations devoted mainly to the prevention of HIV/AIDS, crisis intervention and social assistance. Also in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, the Government was disseminating information on the dangers of newspaper advertisements promising lucrative jobs abroad. Several issues of a bulletin containing the accounts of women who had responded to such advertisements and analyses by criminologists and crime prevention personnel had already been circulated in cooperation with a non-governmental organization, La Strada. The national and municipal police also distributed, in areas frequented by prostitutes, leaflets offering anonymous assistance to girls who were victims of trafficking in women.

34. In cooperation with La Strada, an international conference on the problem had been organized for police officers from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Ukraine and other countries; participation by non-governmental organizations in the conference had been considerable. Like social protection programmes, programmes of assistance for victims of trafficking in women were funded from the national budget and by grants from the Ministry of Health. Two units of the Czech police were responsible for dealing with prostitution and procuring: the Criminal Service and the Department of Organized Crime. In that connection, the role of non-governmental organizations in making contact with marginalized groups was invaluable.

35. While prostitution per se was not considered a crime in the Czech Republic, it could be prosecuted in connection with other crimes. In response to the request for statistics on procuring, she said that, in 1994, 203 people had been prosecuted for procurement and 192 had been cleared; in 1995, 239 people had been prosecuted and 226 cleared; in 1996, 150 people had been prosecuted and 144 cleared; and in 1997, 125 people had been prosecuted. Under the Criminal Code, the penalties for procurement were: one to three years' imprisonment; one to five years' imprisonment if the crime involved violence or the threat of violence; two to eight years if the offender had profited considerably from the crime or if it was committed by a member of an organized group; and five to 12 years if it was committed against a person under 15 years of age.

36. The Czech police were very discouraged by the low success rate in investigating and prosecuting crimes of trafficking in women. Information was complete only when it was obtained from the victims themselves. Typically, however, the accused were interrogated in the presence of their lawyers, resulting in information leaks, and witnesses were released, only to be harassed by organized groups so that they ultimately changed their testimony or failed to appear in court. Trafficking operations were often too cleverly timed to result in the expulsion of the girls involved; traffickers kept scrupulous track of student and tourist visa expiry dates. The Czech police were cooperating with

police in other European countries in investigating organized crime. A few months previously a Bulgarian gang operating a prostitution ring in the Czech Republic had been apprehended, in cooperation with La Strada. Every effort had been made to assist the young girls involved, who were in very poor health. In the belief that prostitution was a flagrant violation of the human rights of women and girls, the Czech Government was currently studying the problem in all its aspects, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations.

37. Ms. KASTANKOVA (Czech Republic), referring to article 10, said that primary school education had been compulsory for all since the eighteenth century; in 1918, women had been guaranteed access to secondary and university education as well. Before 1989, however, admission to secondary schools and universities had been strictly limited in accordance with anticipated labour requirements, with rigid quotas for girls and boys in each field. Priority had been given to pupils from workers' families in admission to ordinary secondary schools, while over 60 per cent of pupils had been enrolled in secondary apprentice training centres that supplied the demand for workers. As a result, many gifted pupils had been steered into apprenticeships, and there had been a 30 per cent drop out rate among the 25 per cent of girls admitted to the centres, who had often found themselves assigned to uncongenial fields of study. Only 10 per cent of all pupils had been admitted to university, where the social sciences had not been widely taught.

38. After 1989, secondary school admission procedures had been liberalized to ensure full gender equality, except in fields from which women were barred for reasons of health under the Labour Code, and admissions had been based solely on merit. Many new secondary vocational schools had been established to supply the demand for education in economics, the social sciences, the humanities and business. The household economy schools referred to in paragraph 139 of the report had been set up in response to parental pressure and advice from educational experts and had taught typing, accounting and basic management skills, in addition to traditional subjects. The graduates of such schools had been mainly women, but the education provided had been inferior to that given in normal business schools, leaving them at a disadvantage on the job market. Consequently, many of these experimental schools had been abolished, and the best of them had been merged with business schools under the aegis of the Ministry of Education.

39. The decline in the number of students enrolled in technical courses was a reaction to the earlier system of forced enrolment in what was a very demanding course of study leading to poorly paid jobs. Her Government was aware of the need to strengthen the technology sector and was trying to encourage young people to study in that field. State scholarships were offered to socially disadvantaged or gifted students. Most businesses were not in a position to fund scholarships. With regard to military schools, women could attend such schools and study in all fields, and were eligible for all military ranks.

40. With regard to the study of the Convention in schools, teachers were familiar with its provisions because it had been published in the compilation of laws, and its provisions could be taught as part of the civic education curriculum in primary schools and the history curriculum in secondary schools.

41. The problem of the feminization of teaching and its low remuneration - a common European problem - had started after the First World War and had been exacerbated by the stereotyped perception that women were more suited to teaching than men, and would be satisfied with lower pay. The Ministry of Education had started a project which stressed career development for well-trained teachers, in order to increase their motivation and help them to secure higher salaries; the project had been very well received by teachers.

42. Mr. FUCHS (Czech Republic), replying to questions on equality in the field of employment and economic rights under article 11 of the Convention, said that the prohibition of certain types of work for women, as outlined in paragraphs 151 to 162 of the report, was a form of positive discrimination permitted under article 4 of the Convention and article 29 of the country's Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms. The text of the 1997 Ministry of Health decree (para. 155) defining the nine types of excessively difficult or dangerous work from which all women were barred, and the 42 types barred to pregnant women and recent mothers, would be supplied to the Committee. Pregnant women and women with small children dismissed in violation of section 48 of the Labour Code (para. 152) could seek redress in the courts. In addition, a draft amendment to the Employment Act would ensure better enforcement of the Labour Code and provide penalties for employers who discriminated on the basis of sex. The new Labour Code to be adopted in the year 2000 would be fully compatible with the Convention and other international instruments to which the Czech Republic was a party, including European conventions, especially with regard to women's conditions of employment.

43. Regarding the right of women to social security, the special statutory retirement age for women (para. 147) had been designed to reflect the number of children a woman had had, in recognition of the time spent by women on caring for children. The allowable period of up to four years was pensionable, as it was for men. Women were entitled to a pension once they reached retirement age, but could continue to work; in such cases, their pensions rose by 1 per cent for every 90 days' additional work, and after two years, their pension payments were based on a cost-of-living minimum. If women opted for early retirement, which was available to them two years before the statutory age of retirement provided that they had accumulated 25 years of social security insurance and met certain unemployment conditions, their pension was reduced by 0.6 per cent. The principle of equal pay for equal work, embodied not only in the Convention and in ILO Convention No. 100 but also in the European Social Charter and European Union legislation, was set out in the Constitution and in all wage legislation. In practice, however, women were earning an average of 25 per cent less than men, as they did in other European countries. The Government was trying to improve that situation: a special law drafted by the Ministry of Social Affairs with ILO assistance guaranteed freedom of collective bargaining in all public sector employment, and established very detailed laws guaranteeing equal pay for women and providing court redress in the event of violations. Also, the 1992 general wage laws had just been amended to specify the principle of equal pay for equal work in all fields and to provide means of enforcement.

44. Ms. POLAKOVA (Czech Republic) replying to questions regarding contraception and abortion in relation to article 12 of the Convention, said that, until 1989, contraception had not been the method of choice for women in their family

planning, because only contraceptives with dangerous side-effects had been available. That explained the high incidence of abortion. Since 1989, however, approximately half a million women had begun to use both IUDs and improved hormone contraceptives; currently, one third of women of childbearing age used contraception.

45. The continuing high rate of abortion remained a major concern of the Ministry of Health. The Government did not recommend abortion as an alternative to contraception, nor did it fund abortions. Its public education campaign on the use of contraception had begun to bear fruit. The number of abortions had initially risen in 1986, when the humiliating procedure of having public commissions authorize each abortion had been abolished, but had begun to decline after 1989. In 1993, the abortion rate had declined by 25 per cent over 1992, and that trend was continuing although the pace of the decline had slowed. Health officials were working to minimize the psychological and health risks of abortion. Whereas, in 1990, over 100,000 first trimester abortions, which now accounted for over 80 per cent of all induced abortions, had been carried out, by 1996 the number had dropped to just over 46,000.

46. As to the groups of women who sought abortions, 26 per cent were single women under the age of 24, and 61 per cent were married women aged 25 to 34. Forty per cent of the total were women with one child and their ages generally ranged from 20 to 24. Another 40 per cent were women with two children, mainly aged between 30 and 34, and 20 per cent were women, typically 19 years of age, with no children. A quarter of all abortions were sought for health reasons, but the primary motivation was economic. In 1997, there had been 64 abortions per 100 live births, of which 51 had been induced abortions - mostly first trimester abortions.

47. Available 1997 statistics on pregnant women showed that there had been 1.4 live births per married woman. Unfortunately, the neonatal mortality rate had exceeded that of live births. The average age of marriage had risen from 21 years in 1989 to 25 in 1995.

48. Her Government's emphasis on women's role as mothers, to which Committee members had taken such exception, was a necessary reaction to 50 years of suppression of that role, during which time women had been viewed exclusively as economic beings who were forced to work two shifts. The return to emphasizing family life was seen as a necessary affirmation of a basic principle of society, and she regretted that the Committee saw it as a lack of respect for women. Family-building was, in any case, the responsibility of both men and women.

49. Ms. HEJNA (Czech Republic) assured the Committee that her Government attached great importance to implementing the Convention and would make every effort in its next report to show the progress made.

50. Ms. GONZALEZ observed that, although she would have liked more information in response to her request for employment data, she appreciated the statistics, some of them surprising, which the delegation had been able to supply at short notice.

51. The CHAIRPERSON, speaking in her personal capacity, cautioned that Czech society should not fall into the temptation of urging women to withdraw from the job market in order to cultivate stereotypical family roles. The Convention sought to ensure the rights of women as individuals, independently of their maternal or family role.

52. The Committee awaited the next report of the Czech Republic with interest and hoped that it would contain sufficient gender disaggregated data and a fuller discussion of the difficulties encountered in implementing the Convention. The Government was to be commended for having given international instruments precedence over national legislation and for the success achieved in the transition to democratic governance and a free-market system. The fact that the Czech Republic was soon to join the European Union should give impetus to its efforts to achieve gender equality and combat discrimination against women.

The meeting rose at 6.10 p.m.